

Claudio Abbado's covers show a conductor unaware of the photographer's presence. This handsome, young musician with the glossy head of black hair, is utterly involved with his work. The gestures are direct and unfussy. Brahms symphony number 2: a pointed finger. Tchaikovsky symphony number 5: a widely spread hand quivering with tension. And always the eyes: deep brown, searching out every nuance of the musicians in front of him. On appearances alone, Claudio Abbado is a passionate figure in the accepted Italian mould.

He turns into the Hotel Kempinski, but forgets his room number. He is disoriented; a man who has spent time in too many hotels, for whom one is much like another. As usual his room has expensive wine sent from the local office of his recording company, Deutsche Grammophon. Today there's a Mouton Rothschild from DG Hamburg and three bottles of Heidsieck champagne from DG Berlin. (For wine to be delivered to the hotel rather than the dressing room is an indication of stature in the recording world. Pity the poor conductor who receives no wine at all.)

In a world where they talk of (Bernard) Haitink, (Pierre) Boulez and (André) Previn, it's always Zubin (Mehta), Danny (Barenboim), Seiji (Ozawa) and Claudio. But of that flamboyant lot, only one remains an enigma to his fellow musicians - Abbado. He's recognised by orchestra players as one of the few great conductors but they sense that he is in some way veiled from them.

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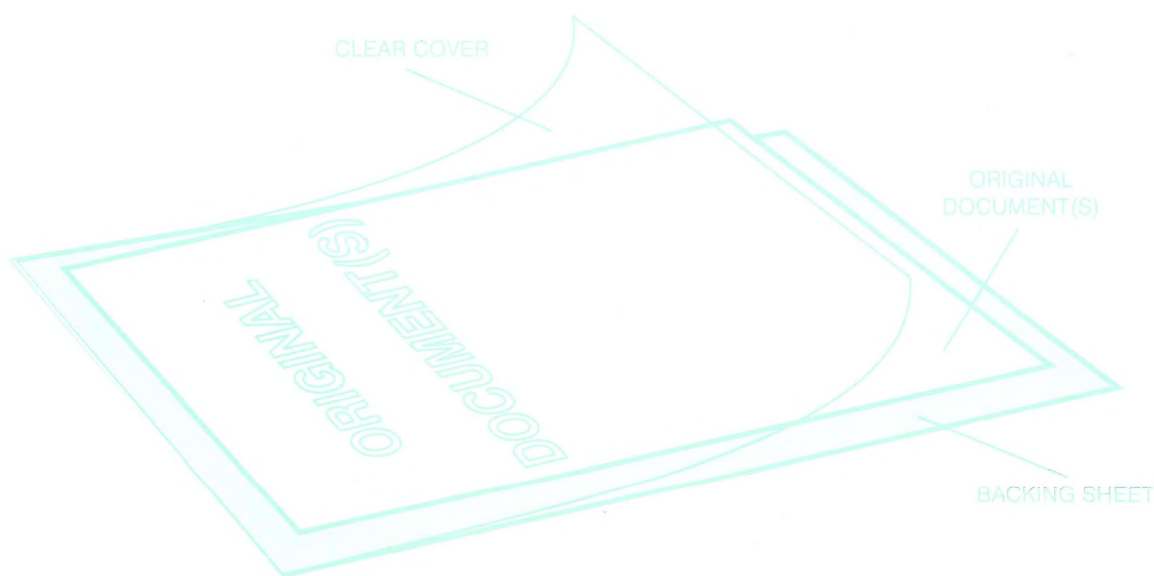
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# I, Claudio

## Scenes from the life of a famous musician

Claudio Abbado, the young artistic director of La Scala, Milan, will soon take over from André Previn one of the most coveted jobs of British music – principal conductor of our most brilliant orchestra, the London Symphony. Earlier this year, Abbado allowed our writer and photographer to follow his life like “flies on the wall” as he travelled on engagements in Berlin, London and Paris. They gained a unique insight into Abbado’s elusive personality; and for three weeks they were able to observe the workings of the upper echelons of the music world from an unusual and revealing point of view

**By Linda Blandford; pictures by David Steen**



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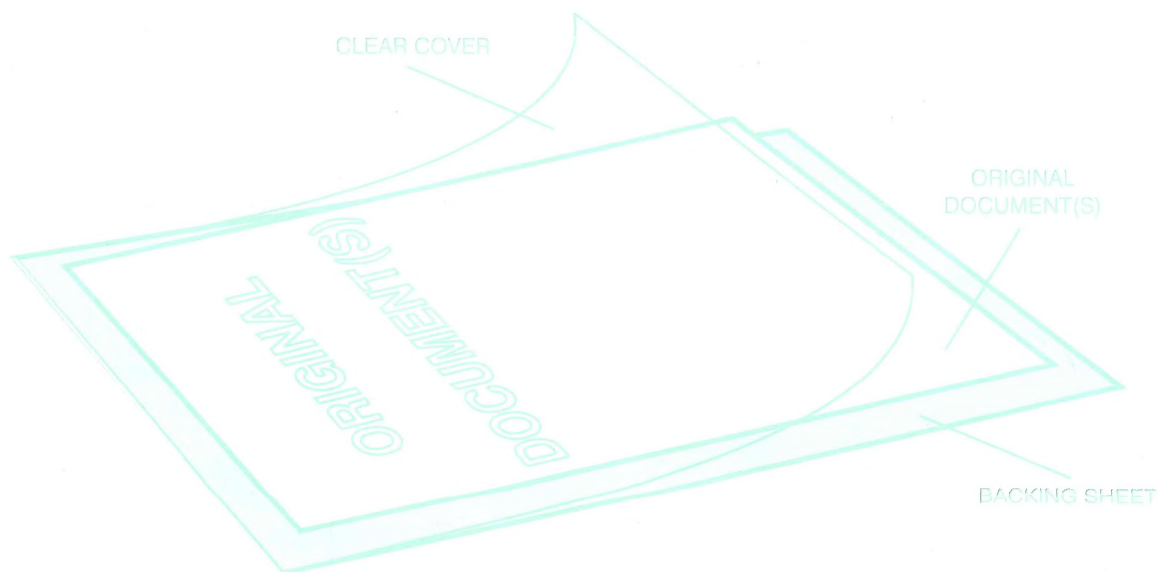
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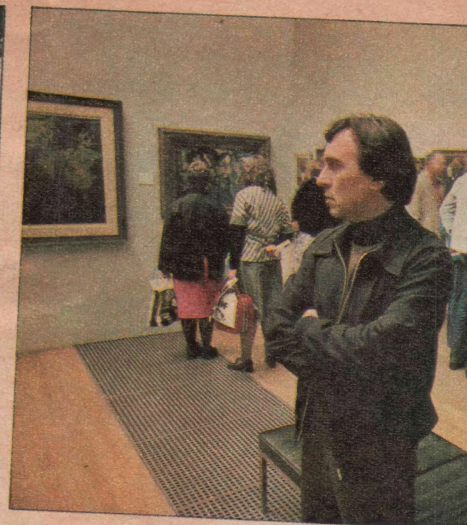
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## Contrasts of Abbado's day in London... the chauffeured limousine sent away in favour of

dark trousers and sweater give no suggestion of his puma-like frame. He looks dull and this is probably not accidental. It is unusual.

Conductors are music's matadors and they dress with the same well-fitted pride for going into the ring. The ones who proceed into the rehearsal hall in darted shirts or tight polo-necks give warning of the man-to-man confrontation to come. There are those who strut, those who scamper with a boyish appeal that is sometimes no longer their own, those who make an entrance all the while exuding energetic confidence. Abbado slides in. It's a hidden walk just as his handwriting is that of a secretive spider. Who would guess that he has already been on the phone for an hour – organising, deciding, dealing with the daily problems of that most temperamental of international opera houses, La Scala? (Singers and productions for 1983; sore throats for tomorrow.) In Berlin who would care?

Musicians are insecure creatures; there are so few absolutes in their working lives. No-one knows whether a great talent will grow or block. Yesterday's brilliant interpreter may turn out to be tomorrow's hack. Often no-one can agree in the first place on what is a brilliant interpretation. To lessen the anxiety, musicians look for reassurances; they turn to father figure conductors such as Böhm or Jochum or those who are revered and safely dead, such as Toscanini and Furtwängler.

They also, though they hate to admit it, indulge in the same confidence trick as the public, seeking to award titles: The Greatest Violinist, The Greatest Pianist, The Greatest Conductor and, especially, The Greatest Orchestra. The Berlin Philharmonic cannot be characterised as an anxious, insecure orchestra: it knows it is The Greatest (although they mightn't agree on that in Chicago or Vienna). And if this isn't enough, its musicians have their own titles: Herr Professor, Herr Doktor – and woe betide the ingénue who doesn't understand all this formality.

Abbado does: he balked at the title of Herr General Musikdirektor at the Berlin Opera. Now he hates to be called Maestro. He can hide himself well enough; he doesn't need the refuge of ritual. He also understands something else: when this orchestra plays under anyone but Herbert von Karajan, it is the Berlin Philharmonic that is the

soloist. Thus the saga of the rehearsal that is come makes some kind of sense.



What do conductors do? To anyone who just goes to concerts, who has never sat in on a rehearsal, never played in the school orchestra, the man on the podium looks as essential as a drum majorette. What's actually going on is that this one man is trying to impose his vision on a crowd of anarchist artists who have to come together in one interpretation – his.

It's hard enough for the player: the message he's trying to get over has to come from inside him, travel down muscles and nerves into his fingers, and then through his instrument before it starts on its way to the listener's ear. A conductor works at many times that remove. By sheer force of personality he has to transmit the message simultaneously to the whole orchestra, to make his sound in a dumbshow.

Serious musicians live on their emotions as others live on nerves. To be around them when they're working is to be battered by tensions and atmospheres. When nothing seems to be happening is often when their most fraught dramas are enacted.



The Berlin orchestra admires Abbado. It's an important sign that he isn't introduced when he comes to the podium. Some musicians tap their bows, albeit almost imperceptibly, against their music stands. That's recognition. Abbado isn't a conductor for the opening pitch. No jokes or pep talk. He opens his pocket score and gives the downbeat for Schubert's second symphony. What's this? Repeats in the second movement? No, it's explained to him, this orchestra doesn't take *those* repeats. He asks the brass to play more softly; they're covering the strings. "We can't do that. The score's marked fortissimo." A violinist disappears; he's gone off for a pencil.

Each time Abbado stops, the orchestra plays on – a signal with other orchestras of complete lack of respect for the man on the podium. A different personality would lose this battle. Abbado doesn't flicker; he remains utterly impersonal. If he's being challenged, he refuses to take up the gauntlet. The rehearsal may seem to be uneventful; it's actually cracking with tension. At the end of it, Abbado is ferried back to the Hotel Kempinski by his German agent, still betraying no sign of irritation. ➤



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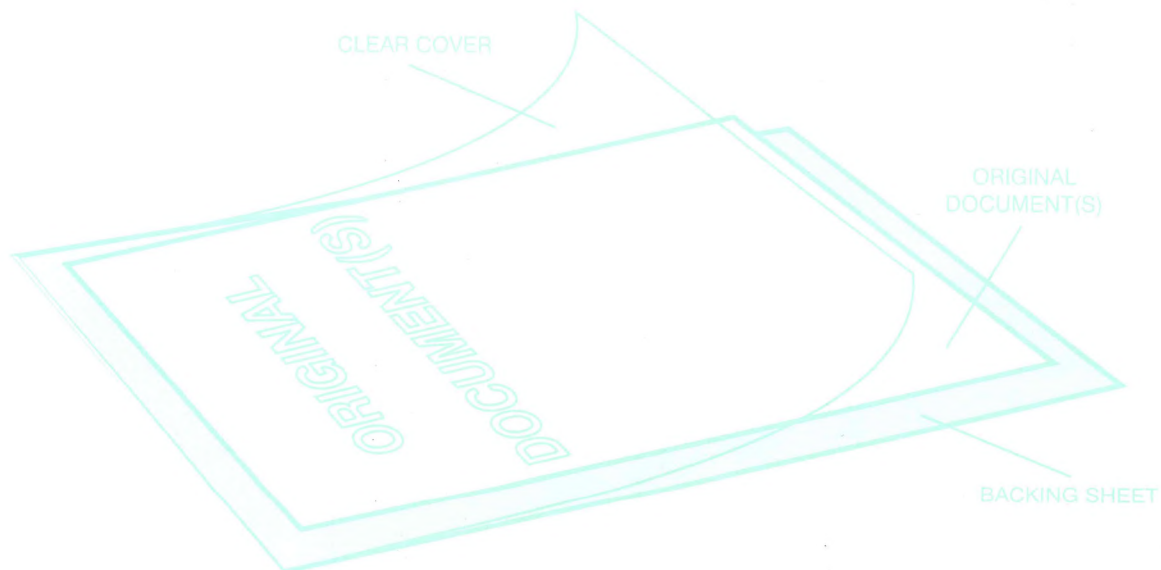
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**CLAUDIO ABBADO continued**

His agent, Hans Adler, is eager to fill him in on his newest protégée, a 14-year-old violinist, Anne Sophie Mutter. Karajan discovered her and she's already made her first solo record with him. Barenboim has just given her an English debut; Mehta's talking of New York. Shouldn't La Scala be thinking of hiring her for their concert season? The artistic director of La Scala is thinking only of his neck and back. They are knotted with pain.

The Chinese restaurant is almost empty. It feels drab and drained, a fitting reflection of Abbado's mood. It worries him that his eyes are tired. He feels they talk for him. It's true; his gentle, unstressed speech communicates little. He doesn't fidget; his hands hardly move. He used to have a 14-note stretch when he was a pianist. Now his fingers have lost their flexibility; his hands have thickened. At rest they're not expressive.

It's necessary to watch his eyes, to read them carefully for every subtlety. He is part Sicilian, part Norman, part Arab, part Jew – the product of four old and devious cultures. Conductors are notoriously bad listeners. Abbado listens with the concentration of a desert Arab trying to distinguish friend from foe, which he usually is. The music business has its savage side and wears many faces.

It is fashionable to talk of an Italian Abbado/Muti rivalry as it once was of the Callas/Tebaldi feud. "Claudio resents Riccardo Muti," say the maliciously indifferent gossips. "Muti's now principal guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. He has a lion's personality and the passion Claudio lacks." "Muti's younger," say the smallest minded, "and his hair is glossier." All of this irks Abbado; he tried to stop the talk by going to conduct in Florence where Muti is music director and by inviting Muti to La Scala. "There are many great orchestras and room for many conductors," he says.

Abbado's struggle is with himself. The only thrust that could wound is that one about his coldness. He's 44 and still striving to express outwardly all his burning, inner feelings for music. "Cold? I think at the beginning I used to be too controlled. I was thinking of technique too much of the time and I was also unsure of myself. I don't like to conduct to



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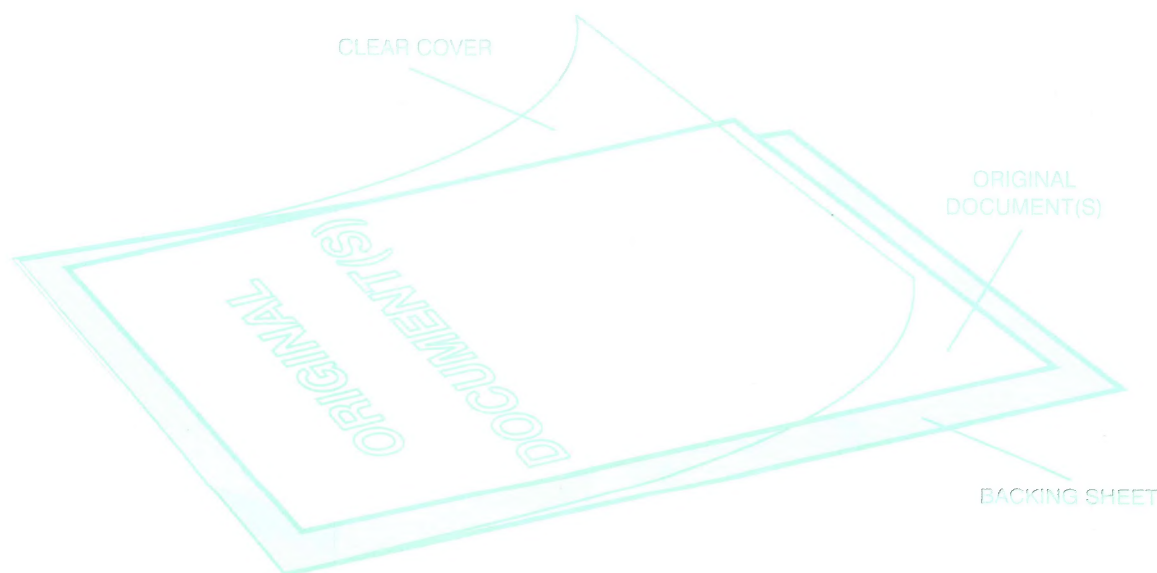
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## Rehearsing 100 musicians: by sheer force of personality he has to impose a single interpretation

unlikely, too, that Abbado would resent a Muti when in 20 years he has never resented his real alter ego, Zubin Mehta.

Zubin Mehta, now music director of the New York Philharmonic, is a huge, glamorous figure, totally self-confident. Where Abbado is cerebral, carefully sieving his every experience and feeling through his intellect, Mehta is the ultimate sensualist. Twenty years ago when they were studying together in Vienna, few thought that Abbado would achieve an equally glittering career. When Abbado came to Vienna at 22 to study conducting with Hans Swarovsky, he was diffident, introverted. It hadn't been clear that he had a great talent until late for a musician (around 16). "I was very complicated but Zubin at 20 was already a conductor. For me it was not the same.

I knew that I should have to study my whole life." Swarovsky was a devoted, first-rate teacher and second-rate conductor whose career flourished under the Nazis with whom he maintained close and high-level contact.

There's a particular moral dilemma that confronts all artists. Is it art for art's sake or art for life's sake? Is Wagner's music tainted by his political motivation or does it stand alone? Would one have played under Furtwängler? (He, too, conducted under the Nazis.) Should one have played in the White House during the bombing of Hanoi?

Abbado has been confronted with the complexity of this kind of dilemma from an early age. He lived in Italy under Nazi occupation. His mother was jailed in 1944 for hiding a Jewish child. His father, a violinist,

kept the family together by playing on the radio and was accused, after the war of collaboration. "People like to give a cliché to other people and you can't change that mentality." When Abbado came to Vienna he did not need to examine and pass judgment on Swarovsky's past; he already understood about grey area. He's unusually honest about his own. "For years I wouldn't go to Spain for political reasons but then Spain has never had great orchestras," he points out.

In their need to control other musicians, great conductors learn to play exquisite psychological games. There are tyrants, torturers, manipulators, wheedlers, teasers, and, occasionally, those who mobilise the power of inspiring confidence rather than holding back approval. None of them, however, welcome a hard look at their own tangled personalities. Sometimes it is vanity. Sometimes it's a sense that the mysterious nature of their gift is somehow interwoven with every aspect of their psychological structure, unhealthy as well as healthy.

Abbado is gentle with others; he neither confronts nor openly competes. In rehearsal he doesn't use his podium against the men who are

literally below him. He will even get down from it and walk back into the orchestra, a total capitulation of outward power. Having decided to trust, there's little he will not discuss. But there's no way he will offer up his inner complexity for dissection. "I want to keep it inside; I'm frightened that something



LSO principal cellist, Dougie Cummings, loses his floppy hat



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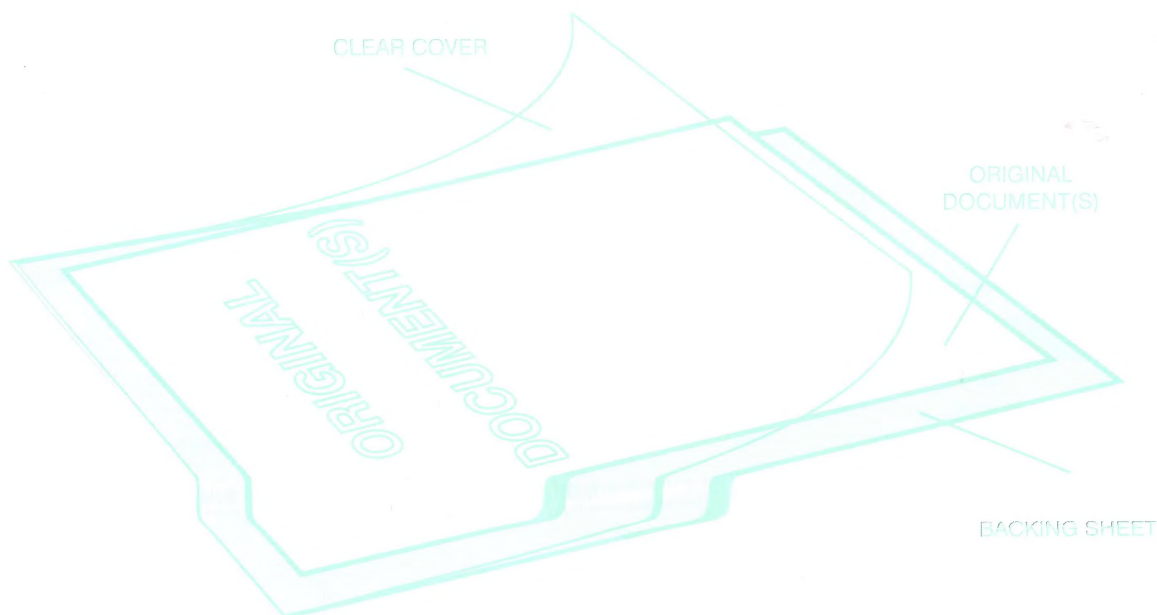
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able to crack jokes and hammer out business deals right up to the moment they walk out on stage. Abbado is low key; at three he goes upstairs. He doesn't put it that he's going to rest and almost resents the suggestion that he might need to.



Claudio Abbado has 117 performances this season, an average of more than two a week. For most of these there are three rehearsals. Then there's the music to learn. He rarely plays the same piece twice in quick succession so he has to do the homework every time. The instrumentalist has to learn only his line. The conductor has to study and know them all.

His life is as totally organised as a lifer in prison; he knows what he'll be doing morning, afternoon and evening for the next three years, flu or no flu. There are no weekends. He tries to take five weeks' holiday a year - but he is responsible the whole year for who plays and sings at La Scala. If there's a mess, as artistic director it's his job to sort it out. Then again there are the auditions. Wherever he is in the world he is available to musicians who want to play for him.

Apart from all this, he needs the quiet for the purely creative part of interpreting and constantly re-interpreting. He has got used to doing this late at night and will often sit down to study after midnight - the only time the phone doesn't ring. But when he gets up on the podium for a concert, he can't afford to be tired. He has to have the concentration and emotional resources to impose his will.



At 7.30 he's ready to leave for the concert hall. His baton is tucked into the sleeve of his black raincoat. He always uses the same one; once he picked up another stick and realised the mistake the second he gave the downbeat. It was a nuisance, a distraction. His baton has to be so much part of him that it speaks for him during performance, Aaron's staff. That's why he chooses to say so little during rehearsal. "When it comes to the concert, it has to be there," he points to the stick.

He leaves his glasses at the hotel.  
“When I was 16, I went to play for  
Toscanini at his house in Milan. He  
was very short-sighted but never  
wore glasses during a concert. He told  
me it was far more important ➡➢➣



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Conductor Claudio Abbado and oboist Anthony Camden  
Manager, Martin Campbell-White

and unwillingness to conduct without enough of it, backfired during his earlier career. Among conductors, he wins who weighs in with the heaviest and longest list of repertoire. Abbado acquired the reputation among some for having a rather small repertoire; another insult. He refused, as always, to respond to the challenge. Even now he won't say how many works, including operas, he has by memory. "Why do I have to count? What does it prove? Every time I like to start again from the beginning." Suffice to say, his scores stay backstage during performance.

In the 10 minutes or so between his arrival at the hall and departure

for the podium, Abbado keeps his dressing room door open. Only the 'in' and the insensitive come back right before a concert. The upper echelons of Deutsche Grammophon have turned out in force of course. It's very noticeable when a conductor warrants only the recording company's PR. Abbado's eyes dart to the door: he's looking for someone.

He's looking for Rainer Brock, a key person in his musical life as the producer of his records for Deutsche Grammophon. When the lights dim, Brock is on the edge of his seat, 20 rows back. He is tall, slender with long, light brown hair and, like Abbado, looks younger than 44. He is, however, more elegantly arranged in cream trousers and black blazer. And he, at any rate, does not seem constricted by his glasses. If Abbado's weapons are his eyes, Brock's are his ears.

Brock and Abbado studied conducting together in Vienna. At the time that Abbado had hardly any concerts, Rainer Brock became music director of a German opera house. "It was a terrible experience." From there he went improbably into the interior decorating business in Switzerland. There, even more ➤➤➤➤➤ 53

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**CLAUDIO ABBADO continued**

for the orchestra to be able to see the expression in his eyes than for him to see the orchestra." He won't use a score; if he has to look down at the notes, the eye contact is broken. "Some people think I conduct from memory for show. It isn't true. During a performance something will always go wrong, whether you have a score or not. But if you really know the music you can repair the trouble faster."

A conductor's score is a giveaway. Orchestra librarians often learn a great deal from it about a new guest conductor. When he sends his scores ahead to have bowings, dynamics and cuts copied into the orchestra parts, the librarian gets a chance to see a lot of other things as well. If a score is covered with coloured pencil markings so that phrasing and dynamics will stand out more clearly on the night, the librarian shakes his head knowingly. And if a conductor has to remind himself with crayon markings about what instrument plays what and when - watch out. He's cribbing. It's a charitable librarian who will keep this information to himself and from his orchestra colleagues. Abbado's own scores are well-thumbed.



**'The Whizzer', LSO chairman (left) with Abbado and his ma**

Inside the covers are a neat list of all performances he has conducted. Otherwise they're clean; Abbado is renowned for the way he knows his music.

"One reason not to improvise, not to give a concert with only a week to learn a piece is that I need time, months or years, for it to become part of me." Certain other conductors are not so fastidious; if they're talented and charismatic enough, with big enough egos to carry it off, they can get by - for a while. "He has his head buried in the score," is one of the worst insults an orchestra musician can pay a conductor.

Ironically Abbado's preparation

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**CLAUDIO ABBADO continued**

improbably, Mrs Herbert von Karajan found him one day in a glossy magazine and called him in to do up their chalet in St Moritz. No, he said, enough of decorating; it was time to go back to music. Her husband, with his inimitable nose for talent, put Brock in touch with DG.

A recording studio creates emotional difficulties for Abbado. For a start he misses an audience: "It's cold and unreal without one." But it's more than that. He's a man with iron self-control who needs to control things around him, albeit with invisible reins and soft hands. In the studio he has to put himself in Brock's charge. Brock listens to each take through loudspeakers in the taping room; he decides when it's good enough and what must be tried again.

He is a cool, impartial critic. His reaction tonight will mean much to Abbado who has no mentor figures and must rely on a few carefully chosen peers. Some conductors don't need, or at least don't want, criticism. "Tell me honestly what you think?" may mean, "Tell me how wonderful it was." But Abbado welcomes genuine criticism from those he trusts.

Yes, there is a tension in the air as he comes out. "There was always something from the audience before Furtwängler started to conduct," Abbado explained earlier, and "that's part of a performance too. I love it when you can feel the silence." Despite his smoothly fitting tails, he still doesn't look particularly impressive. No taking the podium at a leap or other athletic high-jinks calculated to suggest muscle power straining to be unleashed. He makes the stagehands take down the front safety bar; nothing should come between himself and the orchestra.

What follows is a transformation; almost the story of the frog prince. As Brock says in wonder during intermission, "I forget that Claudio is such a glamour figure on the podium. His body can do nothing wrong." Maybe the musicians are being transfixed by the laser beam of his eyes but, out front it is his strong, confident and beautifully expressive body that is the magnet. It is a marvellous Schubert full of precision, subtlety and sensitivity. But it is the closing work that burns itself on the memory, Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*.

"There is no-one who can do this

like Claudio," says Rainer Brock. "If this is right, it is as if the music belongs to him." This symphonic poem expressing the struggle of life against death is exactly suited to Abbado's mystical nature in quest of the Holy Grail. Afterwards the silence is uncanny; this is the most deafening applause of all. By the time Abbado turns to the audience, the mask has slipped on again. As he is called back again and again, there is no trace of the passionate musician of minutes ago. When the lights go up, Rainer Brock is deeply embarrassed. It is a profound tribute to Abbado that Brock has been moved to tears.



It is the morning after. The first review: superb. Hildegard Behrens arrives in a skin-tight grey suede catsuit bearing flowers. She wishes to share her personal success of last night and is doing so with part of her bouquet. Abbado has been on the phone for an hour and out walking for two. Miss Behrens has been asleep.

Last night between Schubert and Strauss, she sang Beethoven's aria, *Ah Perfido!* and Berg's *Altenberg Liede*. Berlin has been curious about this latest overnight sensation of the opera world; it was not disappointed. Her debut went well. There are various grades of success; respectful applause, reserved but solid reviews and positive orchestra reaction, equals a good debut. Newer soloists and conductors sometimes play safe; they'd rather impress the orchestra than risk 'forcing' in order to make a hit with the public. Embellishments and a sense of theatre may do wonders for the ticket buyers but they cut no ice with the pros. They've seen it all before.

It isn't Behrens's mentality to play safe. She couldn't afford to, anyway, in this her first engagement with Abbado, artistic director of La Scala. He's one of a handful of musicians of major importance to singers. She went all out. Many bravas would have been enough. She got top marks: she got them out of their seats and impressed Abbado with her preparation and intelligence. He watched her carefully, was with her at every moment; a good sign.

No wonder he likes her; she's another oddity. Sipping champagne, that strong face working constantly, she is Dietrich crossed with Colette. A sensual, bright, untamed, afro-haired gypsy of a certain age, and



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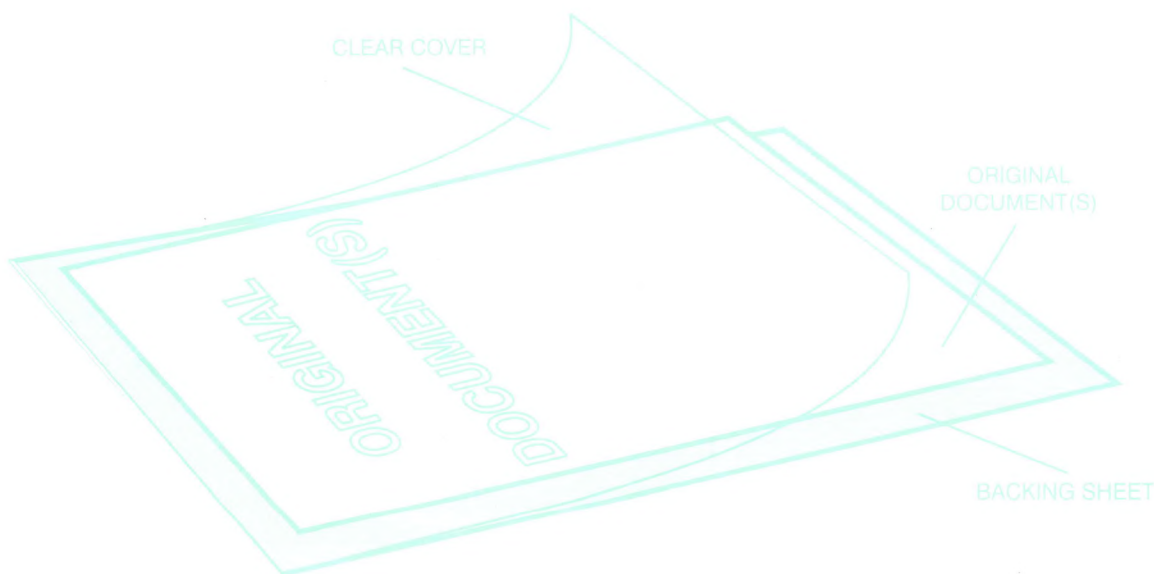
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also a qualified lawyer. It's an even better sign that Abbado has taken to discussing her small son with her; for him to become personal is a large leap.

For most people, Behrens was born last summer at the Salzburg Festival when von Karajan presented her as a vocally stunning and sexually riveting Salome in Strauss's opera. It was her first important engagement and she could now book herself through 1983 if she chose to. The myth of the overnight sensation amuses musicians; no-one bursts on to the scene who hasn't been around and preparing for this moment for years. Behrens had been at Dusseldorf opera house since 1972 and takes a piquant delight now in avenging her earlier, hard years by being tough over money. "I won't be mad if they don't want to pay me and I don't sing," she says before leaving. "I would like for my voice to last."

She might have stayed longer in provincial German houses had it not been for Herbert von Karajan. Of course, she's his discovery; so many are. The ego of great musicians works in different ways. Some can't spare themselves for young artists. Other egos, equally large, express themselves through an insistence on the best music-making and the search for the best musicians. This is von Karajan.

There are several ways in which Karajan has founded his musical empire. As music director of the Berlin Philharmonic, as 'king' of the Salzburg Festival, as premier conductor of both DG and EMI/Angel, as a major force in the money-spinning television film company, Unitel, he can offer unparalleled patronage to artists.

Abbado and Behrens have one thing in common; they were both heard by Karajan in unlikely circumstances and it is to him they owe their

big break. In 1974 he turned up un-

announced at a Dusseldorf rehearsal

and that afternoon offered Hildegaard Behrens the Salome. In 1964 he heard Abbado and invited him to Salzburg for the following summer. It was the kind of stunning event that makes a career. Abbado, too, was an overnight sensation.

After his year with the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, Abbado's career had been in something of a bad way. He had come back to Europe and was turning

down everything that wasn't right. "Do you know how hard it was for me to have only two or three concerts a year for so long? To get up every morning at six and drive to Parma to teach?" he asks at one point with such hurt that he apologises a moment later. It's the only unclothed glimpse in two-and-a-half weeks of what really went into the making of Abbado.

No, there was another. When Abbado was still Bernstein's assistant, George Szell cancelled a New York Philharmonic concert with Rubinstein as soloist. Since it was the next day, it should have been Abbado's chance. This, of course, is how it happened for Leonard Bernstein. He, too, had been around for years when he stood in for Bruno Walter. One afternoon he was unknown; the next morning he was a genius. Abbado knew the music; knew he was ready. He slept for an hour that night only to discover next morning that a 'name' conductor had been brought in. "I was hurt inside as you can believe." Did he ever discuss it with Bernstein? No, but years later, he and Rubinstein were in Israel together and it came up. "Why didn't you come to me and talk about it?" asked the pianist. And why didn't he? "I would never ask. It is a question of pride. Is it wrong not to ask? Is it wrong to be proud?" Not wrong but dangerous – and very Italian. Abbado wants everything to come to him.

Salzburg came to him; Mahler's second symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic. Exactly his repertoire and a piece that lends itself to a glorious success – big, impressive, long, a closing fortissimo with a triumphant chorus heralding Resurrection. Karajan was kind and Abbado was lucky.

Every musician is affected by his particular cultural inheritance. Italians are generally accepted as artists who strive towards total

beauty, who won't sacrifice formal perfection for the sake of unbridled intensity. Toscanini is always cited as the only exception.

Abbado has always wanted to grow beyond his Italian inheritance. The accusation of coldness that has been levelled against him has its origin in his innate Italian elegance. Abbado never gets vulgar, his crescendos never too loud, the phrases never too swollen. But neither in the past has he seemed to have ➤➤➤



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